

Easter

Earlier this week I had an appointment with my spiritual director. She asked me what was giving me hope these days.

There are some easily visible things. My spring flowers – those early bulb flowers bloom and look all happy, even when they get pummeled by a spring blizzard.

The budding trees and greening of the plant world – all the signs of new life give me hope. That cycle of life tells me that in some way, death and resurrection are the pattern of all creation.

Then, there's my Chicago Cubs. They're looking pretty good so far this season.

But really, in this Holy Week, what really brings hope is this story...the story we celebrate today.

But that hope is a hope that bubbles up from the deep wellsprings of faith and not so much sight, like the flowers.

Try to imagine for a moment that you have never heard the resurrection story.

Let's say you're one of Jesus' followers, but not the inner circle. You've sort of been hanging out at the edge, watching from a distance. Like everyone, you were horrified and shocked at Jesus' death. Everyone is scared – worried they too will get snatched by Roman soldiers.

At this point, you can't even envision a future for this Jesus movement.

That early Sunday morning, you follow behind the women, staying out of sight. You arrive at the tomb with them. Oddly, the stone has been rolled away.

Two men dressed in dazzling clothes suddenly appear. Well, you and the women are no fools. You know, hey, these are angels! In the appropriate biblical response to angels, the women are terrified. And so are you.

Then the angel chides them – Jesus told you he would be killed. He told you he'd be raised. Why are you looking for the living among the dead?

You run back with the women to where the rest of the disciples are hanging out.

The women tell them what happened. And the men just plain don't believe them. The tale is just too unbelievable. They either didn't remember Jesus' words, or more likely just had no space in their head for a resurrection from the dead. Not like this...here...now. Dead means dead.

Peter runs to look – he too finds the empty tomb, although he doesn't get angels. He sees the grave clothes, absent a body, lying on the stone floor of the tomb.

He's amazed – but there's not much indication he knows what all this means.

We are so used to this story. Many of us have no trouble believing this truly happened exactly as it says. Some see it as a more spiritual event, or a sort of metaphor. Some don't believe it at all. Wherever you fit, the story is so familiar it's hard to register anything close to the shock those early disciples would have been feeling.

We're used to the joy of Easter...the exultations, the soaring hymns and anthems. The proclamation that Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. We've already done some of that.

But let's go back again, to that moment in time before all the Easter exultations.

The women are terrified and puzzled. The disciples don't believe them. Peter doesn't know what it all means. And Jesus is nowhere to be found. Hardly the stuff of exultation...let alone hope.

But isn't that how the life of faith can be for us? My devotional reading yesterday was about Holy Saturday. We often don't give Holy Saturday its due. We probably see it mostly as a day to get things done before Easter Sunday. Maybe there's baseball to watch or the early garden stuff to plant.

The author talked about Holy Saturday as a day of unknowing. It's a liminal or threshold time.

During Lent midweek we talked about the wilderness and that sense of being in a liminal or in between space...a space where something has been left behind, but you're not sure what's next. Holy Saturday was just that.

As the women make their way to the tomb, they are in that space – what they know is that Jesus is dead. But there's still a profound unknowing of what will be next.

The other disciples stay in that in-between space even after they hear what the women saw. It's not a very auspicious beginning for a movement that would change the world.

But how about us? Even though by now, we've heard about the resurrection appearances many times, we weren't actual witnesses.

We can be in the same boat as the women and the disciples in that space of not truly knowing.

We too are afraid - we are afraid because of the certainty of death all around us – sickness, violence, hate, cruelty, death itself.

Some of us aren't sure we believe this story of resurrection. Almost all of us at one time or another struggle with what it means in our lives.

And in the midst of all this, Jesus is not visible. Like the women at the tomb, we don't see Jesus walking out of the tomb in his resurrected glory. Instead we get a message...a message so strange we might find it hard to believe.

On the other hand, maybe it's so strange, it just might be true.

We are all here this morning to hear this message once again. To hear the most improbable message of all time. In the midst of whatever internal doubts and conflicts we might have, we are here to say to ourselves, but what if it is true?

This really is the essence of faith. We can read all sorts of things that try to prove the resurrection really happened. And in fact, there is actual decent evidence that it did. But it's not proof.

Like for the men listening to the women's story, it seems completely illogical and improbable. And yet many of us do believe it. I do. And I believe that Christ is present, here, now.

I believe Christ is present in the word we hear... that Christ is present in the sacrament we'll receive. But that is faith, not sight. And my logical brain may never really get a grasp on the mystery of the resurrection.

In the end, I don't think that is so much the point. The point really is, OK so what? What does it mean for us now?

Jesus' death on the cross looked like a victory for the power of Rome and the corrupt Temple leaders. It looked like the sin system – or Satan if you prefer that title – had won. But even on the cross, evil didn't win. By refusing to participate in the world's system of violence and retaliation, Jesus' death itself was a victory over the forces of evil.

The resurrection puts the official stamp on that victory. Evil doesn't win, Satan doesn't win, the sin system doesn't win...even death itself does not win.

We came here this morning to hear this message of victory – this word from God. We came hoping to hear it and let it reignite our faith.

And to ask ourselves, what if this is true? What would I do different if I knew evil can't win? What would I do if I trusted even death can't win? How would I be different?

These early disciples can be a model for us. Their fear, doubt, and uncertainty at this moment in the story reminds us that we are not the only disciples of Jesus to face fear, doubt and uncertainty.

But they did ultimately go out and share this good news, sometimes in a hostile and dangerous world.

They practiced love of one another and tried to show the world a way of life that was an alternative to the oppressive and violent systems humans always seem to concoct.

They healed and made sure everyone was fed. They shared meals together and learned together. And when plagues or persecutions hit, they had the courage to say no matter what, death doesn't get the last word.

In short, they made Jesus visible in a disbelieving world.

That is our call, too. We live in a world still invested by what theologian Walter Wink called the domination system...a system that trusted power and wealth and viewed some people or groups as better than others.

We make the risen Christ visible when we practice a different way...a way of love and service...a way of peace and simplicity. Christ is made visible when we die to our ego-driven agendas and are raised as the loving servants Jesus calls us to be.

Christ is made visible in communities of diversity and caring when spiritual forces of evil seek to create division and hate.

Christ is made visible...in us. We hear this word...this improbable story...and in the midst of all our doubt and fear, we step out and follow in faith where Jesus led. That's what gives me hope.